Engl 395: The Bible as Literature
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Sam Ayres

The Prophet Who Protested Too Much

by Sam Ayres

> *The lady doth protest too much, methinks.*
> – *Queen Gertrude in* Hamlet*, Act III, Scene 2*

> *Sometimes, the paths of this labyrinth converge; for example, you arrive at this house, but in one of the possible pasts you are my enemy, in another, my friend.*
> – Garden of the Forking Paths*, Jorge Luis Borges*

What should those who set off to do God's will watch for? Their path will surely be crooked and dusty and long, but are there more dangers than their own failures of will? What beasts might they encounter? And who—dare we ask—will send these figurative beasts, slavering, teeth glinting?

Such large-scale questions are raised in a small pericope, easily glossed over, in 1 Kings 13: a short story of the life of a prophet and man of God from Judea. The story is "one of the strangest narratives in the Old Testament" (Van Winkle 1989, 31): a man of God from Judea, commissioned by Yahweh, condemns the recusant Jeroboam and a heretical altar at Bethel, but on his journey home is convinced by an older fellow prophet to stop into his home for food and water, but for doing so is summarily slain by a lion who happens to emerge from the forest and then patiently waits next to the prophet's now unburdened donkey, both of which stand dumbly observing the Judean prophet's corpse until the host prophet finds his slain guest. It seems clear enough at first glance: the man of God from Judea is deceived by the lying older prophet, and pays the price for his gullibility. Like the 'play within a play' in *Hamlet*, the function of 1 Kings

13 appears *at first* to be to highlight the lying and unfaithful characters—and help us to discern false prophecy ourselves.

Upon further inspection, however, we find that the way in which people incorrectly interpret this epigraph from *Hamlet* is the same way in which they wrongly interpret 1 Kings 13. The incorrect but prevalent reading—and regurgitation—of Gertrude's line takes her to mean that the Player Queen 'objects' so fervently to accusations that she betrays herself, and loses credibility.[1](Rather, Gertrude does not think a wife need take such melodramatic and restricting oaths.) In the same way, the "too much" protesting—prophesying—that occurs in the passage leads some to believe falsely that the old prophet is lying, and thus read the passage as a lesson in false prophecy. In this essay, I argue one comes to this conclusion because theological prejudices obscure the literary evidence to the contrary—that *both* of the prophets have received statements from God, and the statements are contradictory. What emerges it is a richer narrative about the solidarity and loss experienced by the men of God on the literal and figurative path set by God—a path haunted by lions and strewn with corpses.

There are a number of initial obstacles to my reading. I will begin by expounding a convincing contrasting reading, and then move forward to the literary aspects of the passage which work against that interpretation. A quite convincing reading of this passage—and one that affords it the most didactic value—is that of D. W. Van Winkle.[2] He argues that 1 Kings 13 is a narrative meant to teach us how to perceive false prophecy. He seeks a "criterion for the discernment of true and false prophecy" to "show that the disobedience of the Judean was not completely innocent" (Van Winkle 1989, 32). He argues that the criterion for discerning is

[1] According to the Oxford English Dictionary (which provides this quotation from Hamlet as an example of usage), "protest" in this sense means "To make a formal or emphatic declaration or statement" ("Protest, v." The Oxford English Dictionary. Draft Revision Sept. 2007. OED Online. Oxford University Press. 31 Oct. 2007 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50190727>).

[2] Van Winkle, D. W. "1 Kings XIII: True and False Prophecy." Vetus Testamentum 29 (1989): 31—43.

"obedience to the commandment of Yahweh," such that the Judean "should have recognized the assurance of the old prophet to be false since it encouraged him to violate the commandment of God" (Van Winkle 1989, 40). He argues that while it is commonplace for "Yahweh [to] change his mind about the future and communicate[] these changes through the prophets," nowhere in the "Deuteronomistic history" is "Yahweh … portrayed as instructing his prophets to encourage disobedience to his commandments" (Van Winkle 1989, 40). Van Winkle finds support for his reading in the semantics of the passage: he argues that the word used to describe God's commandment to the Judean is the same word used "to refer to the Decalogue as well as the entire law promulgated by Moses"; thus, he argues, the "Deuteronomistic editor uses [the term] in an untypical manner in order to" insinuate the Judean's transgression was against the "entire Deuteronomic law" (Van Winkle 1989, 41). Van Winkle's reading rests upon the assumption that the old prophet is lying. He starts with this premise because he is getting caught up in some theological preconceptions—namely, that God could not and would not give contradictory commandments to two of his own prophets.

In addition, there is, to be sure, a glaring piece of text which contradicts my reading: the narrator flatly states that the old prophet "lie[s] unto him [the Judean]" (KJ 1 Kings 13:18). But does he really? Does the text—the tone, the plot structure, and what we know about prophecy—support this summation? Or did a redactor merely think the old prophet was lying, or, rather, believe it to be for the best theologically if this was so. As Van Winkle notes, I am not the first to find this to be a problematic addition to the passage, reeking of redaction: "The most significant alleged post-Deuteronomistic addition to the text is … "he lied to him"" (Van Winkle 1989, 35). Van Winkle does not give this point much thought, and argues that since "no significant text or version omits it" (Van Winkle 1989, 35), it must be part of the original; however, from a literary

vantage there is no further textual evidence to support this summation. Rather, it appears to be incongruous and incorrect: the phrase's curt tone betrays its intention to steer the passage to a certain theological conclusion—that God could not and would not give conflicting messages to two of his prophets.[3] While others have argued this based upon the Hebrew, I am going to (have to) build the argument through textual analysis, by showing that the surrounding narrative shows "he lied unto him" to be a desperate addition meant to assuage the *perceived* theological dissonance of this passage.

So, what is the textual evidence—both in this passage and in the Deutronomistic tradition—to support the argument that God communicated with both prophets, that the older prophet spoke in good faith, and did not lie?

First, it is wholly believable that an Angel could and did indeed visit the old prophet to amend God's earlier commandment. We see throughout the Old Testament angels acting on behalf of God. Indeed, Van Winkle accepts the plausibility of an angel communicating with the old prophet (he does so in order to discount it as a criterion for discerning false prophecy): "Angels [are] considered to be acceptable messengers of Yahweh" in the tradition of which 1 Kings 13 is a part (Van Winkle 1989, 39). Moreover, what the angel told the old prophet is not as contradictory to God's initial commandment as Van Winkle makes it out to be—God would not have changed his mind all that much (although he is allowed to do so [Van Winkle 1989, 38]). By this point, the Judean has carried out the bulk of God's commandment—he has "denounced the altar" (NJ 1 Kings 13:2) of Bethel—and the old prophet (and angel or Yahweh by proxy) does *not* tell the Judean to "return by the way [he] came" (NJ 1 Kings 13:9). The prohibition of eating and drinking is a bit of an afterthought to the Judean's main mission, and one that we

[3] Indeed, Van Winkle notes that I am not the first to reach this conclusion: "[s]cholars who dismiss ["he lied unto him"] as a later gloss suggest that Yahweh is the sender of the second oracle" (35).

could easily see lifted by a God pleased with the Judean's steadfast and pious performance at Bethel. In such a case, an angelic appearance is certainly plausible.

Moreover, the plot's intricacies support the reading that God intended for the prophets to meet after having received contradictory divine commandments. Yahweh specifically diverts the path of the man of God from Judea, and in doing so forces an interaction with the old prophet. Yahweh orders the Judean not "to return by the way [he] came" (NJ 1 Kings 13:9), but rather take another route back from Bethel to Judea. An inordinate amount of attention is paid to the roundabout route of the Judean. It certainly seems like an odd proscription on the part of Yahweh. We can understand not taking food and drink from the recusant Jeroboam, but why must the Judean not go back the way he came? Yahweh is forcing the interaction between the old prophet and the Judean. After all, the old prophet is only able to find the Judean *because* of God's commandment that the Judean voiced proudly. While in the presence of Jeroboam, the Judean declared to the onlookers that he would not "eat or drink" anything in the place of Jeroboam, nor would he "return by the way [he] came" (NJ 1 Kings 13:9); he is well trained, and has his commandment at the ready. The sons of the old prophet hear him say this, and report it to their father: "they told … their father" the "words which [the Judean] had said to the king" (NJ 1 Kings 13:11). Thus, the Judean's obedience to God's commandment—and his vocalization of such obedience to the audience at Jeroboam—assures that he will run into the old prophet. If God had not commanded it in the first place, he would not have vocalized his itinerary, and no one would have known where to find him. Thus, Yahweh assures his two prophets will meet.

Moreover, there is no textual evidence suggesting why the old prophet would try to outright deceive the Judean, for surely he knows of the dangerous consequences of such a venture; rather, he appears to act as if an angel actually spoke with him. Nothing in the text leads

us to see the old prophet as malicious or predatory; rather, his impetus is pious adherence to Yahweh. And if it is, Van Winkle and the traditional reading of the passage—that the old prophet lied so as "to test" the Judean and show that "God's orders must be obeyed absolutely" (NJB footnote 'f,' 453)—are forced to figure in an angel. In other words, are we really meant to believe that there just happened to be an old prophet in Bethel who took it upon himself to be Yahweh's vigilante inquisitor, testing the piety of each prophet who passed through? Hardly. We are forced to conclude that the impetus for his actions was one of two things: either he was malicious, and is out to trick—not test—the Judean, but this does not comport with the fact that he is a man of God in the first place and that Yahweh addresses him after bringing the Judean to his home—an unlikely communication if the old prophet were a malevolent figure; or, the old prophet was doing God's bidding, and the only way he could know to do so was by communication with the divine. An angel or a commandment from Yahweh must figure into the motivations of the old prophet; and when it does, there is no reason to believe the prophet would then lie about what the angel told him.

In this vein, the old prophet is mournful, perplexed, but nonetheless free of guilt after the Judean is slain. The old prophet's reaction adduces the role of an angel: he does not feel guilty, for he too was simply following divine command. Rather than guilt, there is a profound sense of solidarity between the old prophet and the deceased Judean. When the old prophet communicates God's condemnation to the Judean, he appears loath to do so: the old prophet "crie[s] unto the man of God" (KJ 1 Kings 13:21), and is sure to differentiate God's opinion from his own, prefacing it with, "Thus saith the Lord…" (KJ 1 Kings 13:21). Moreover, the old prophet "la[ys] [the Judean's] carcase in his own grave" and with his sons "mourn[s] over him, saying, Alas, my brother!" (KJ 1 Kings 13:31). The old man asks his sons to "bury [him] in the sepulcher wherein

the man of God is buried" and "lay [his] bones beside [the Judean's] bones" (KJ 1 King 13:31). The old prophet's reaction to the death of the Judean is steeped in collegial—almost military—rhetoric and sentiment: there is a sense of brotherly and soldierly solidarity between these two men of God. The old man acts as if they were brothers in arms, and he wants to rest eternally next to his fallen comrade.

In this sense, the old prophet understands what has occurred: rather than a shared enemy *per se*, it is a certain reality—a truth—these two have confronted, sitting together at a kitchen table over steaming bread and sapid drink: the sacrifice required to serve Yahweh. Our interpretation should take its cue from the old prophet's reverence: this passage is not about false prophecy; it is about sacrifice. The conclusion we are forced to draw from this passage is that, while there may be no rhyme or reason to it, no 'justice,' this is how Yahweh operates, the way the world is. The passage seems strangely to privilege and sanctify the death of the Judean. In this sense, Van Winkle is wrong to summarily assume "the Man of God is condemned rather than venerated" (Van Winkle 1989, 36). While the Judean will not reach "the sepulcher of [his] fathers" (KJ 1 Kings 13:22), he receives a peculiar post-mortem quasi-funereal privilege: "the ass … and the lion also st[and] by the carcase" (KJ 1 Kings 13:24), but the "lion [does] not eat[] the carcase, nor [tear] the ass" (KJ 1 Kings 13:28). It is an image of surreal placidity and veneration. The carcass remains intact, untouched, which can only be read as a sign of respect—the Judean is not wholly without funereal rites. The lion, the ultimate carnivore, stands guard against the scavengers that would otherwise descend upon the fallen Judean, thus halting the natural world. Moreover, the Judean becomes a spectacle and symbol, as both human and animal are transfixed by it: "men pass[] by, and [see] he carcase cast in the way" (KJ 1 Kings 13:25). While he cannot be literally enshrined in his fathers' tomb, he is figuratively enshrined, as the

natural world seem to freeze for a moment around his body. There seems to be a sense of redemption sprouting through the lines of the passage, as the passing world—human and animal—stops to reflect upon the life of the Judean.

The nature of the sacrifice in 1 Kings 13 is itself peculiar; in other words, the moral of the passage is not merely the "shit happens" message mercilessly driven home in the rest of the Old Testament—that sort of conclusion is reserved for the stochastic natural disasters and the scenes of massive carnage and fire and brimstone where whole populations are reduced to ash. This narrative of sacrifice is peculiarly different: Yahweh takes great pains so as to force its fruition, and the means of death—a lion—and the subsequent events carry an air of ceremony and spectacle and precision. The medium is the message, in other words: the precision and ceremony surrounding the death is indicative of a certain level of respect (on Yahweh's part); the Judean is not, after all, left as a pile of ashes to be lost amongst the dirt of the road.

Lest we be too sentimental: this narrative is also—like any that focuses upon a grand struggle—about the disposability of the foot soldier. Van Winkle notes, when seeking to pin down the genre of the passage, that the "anonymity of the Man of God indicates that it is not a biography" (Van Winkle 1989, 36). For as much as the Man of God is oddly respected, he does not become a "prophetic legend" (Van Winkle 1989, 36)—we do not even know his name. Thus, the anonymity of the Man of God translates into *theological disposability*: the Judean is perfunctorily slain by a lion with an almost comical air of swiftness: "And when he was gone, a lion met him by the way, and slew him; and his carcasses was cast in the way" the passage succinctly states (KJ 1 Kings 13:24). The passage asserts the disposability of God's agents: the Judean had his mission, did Yahweh's bidding, and was disposed of at the jaws of a lion. Such is the life of a nameless prophet, of a man on the righteous path.

This reading of 1 Kings 13 unearths its resonances with another equally odd passage: the story of Zipporah, Moses, and the flint-stone circumcision (Ex. 4:18-26). This episode uncannily mirrors 1 Kings 13: Moses, with his family, is on a journey to denounce a recusant leader; "the Lord m[eets]" (KJ Ex. 4:24) Moses and "[seeks] to kill him," but Zipporah "cut[s] off the foreskin of her son" (NJ Ex. 4:24-25) and casts it at Moses. The lesson of Ex. 4 might be succinctly stated in terms of apotropaic ritual: one must shed some blood (from Moses' son) to save a greater amount blood (Moses himself). 1 Kings 13 ups the ante: as in Ex. 4, God tries—but this time succeeds—in killing one of his own, one of his prophets. I believe that this passage's ultimate accomplishment is to question the *manner* in which we read a passage and question its contents; 1 Kings 13 alerts us to a reader's preconceptions when accepting the addition "he lied unto him" in spite of the textual evidence to the contrary. In fact, the "lesson" should not be "lost on the modern audience since the disobedience of the Judean was completely innocent because he had no reason to suspect the other prophet of lying" (Van Winkle 1989, 32). Rather, his very innocence unearths a rich passage—one that is at once sentimental and ruthless, ceremonial and callous. It is a passage that shows us, above all, that the path of God—literally and figuratively—is strewn with corpses of the faithful and forever threatened by slinking lions who are, like their eventual prey, sent by God.

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